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ABSTRACT

The poetry unit presented in this paper is designed to teach high school students how to write poetry through personal observation, journal writing, and small group discussion. Using the unit, students progress through the stages of writing according to the following steps: observing a familiar person and noting words and phrases about that individual's inner and outer characteristics; sharing written notes in class with other students; analyzing, through small group discussion, two published poems about persons; writing figurative language by varying sentence structure; and drafting a poem about a person, using journal notes. Also included are student comments and teacher reactions to the unit, guidelines for teaching the writing of poetry, a list of reasons for writing poetry, and a bibliography of references that deal with the teaching of poetry. (HAI)

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Quiet and Warm Like Sunshine: Teaching High School Kids to Write Poetry

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Diane

Diane was at one time quiet and warm
like sunshine,
But now she is outgoing like a cat.
Before, choosing to sit alone
To think or just to be by herself,
Now she still has her rays
From the sun but has learned
To open up
Talk freely
And spend all the time she can
With friends.

Brenda Gibbs

Teachers frequently state they have a tough time getting high school kids to write poetry. And the students themselves are puzzled and upset when they hear they are "going to write a poem."

This is a report of how one series of activities for writing poetry worked with a class of senior high students, including some sample first-draft poems that resulted from the activities--like the one that introduces this piece--an informal assessment of the activities by a senior high English teacher who tried them with her students, and some guidelines for writing and teaching the writing of poetry.

CS 204168

Assumptions About Teaching the Writing of Poetry

The following script of a short unit on writing poetry, "Poetic Writing: Writing a Poem about a Person," is based upon several assumptions derived from an understanding of the composing process and a knowledge of how inexperienced writers proceed through the stages of written composition.

The first assumption is that effective writing results from a process and that students need to be given the experiences of moving through the successive stages of prewriting, writing, revising, and editing. In this unit, students spend much time gathering ideas, making observations, and jotting down words before they approach the task of a first draft. In the prewriting stage, they choose a person--which may or may not be the same person they finish writing about--write down words and phrases about the person's outer physical appearance, his or her inner personality traits, observe the person for several days, get feedback from another student on their notes up to this point, analyze with other students their perceptions of two published poems about persons, and practice writing figurative language by playing with sentence structures.

The second assumption is that, except for the loneliness of first drafting, writing--especially for beginners--should be interactive. The students are invited to share with each other their notes on the outer and inner qualities of their chosen persons. They discuss in small groups how they interpreted the two published poems and learn to use the reactions of the group for revising their pieces. And finally,

after they had produced finished pieces, they would be asked to read and react to each other's poems in small groups, in the class as a whole, or through a publication, like a reproduced anthology. The aim is for teachers and students to see writing as a joyous, communal activity in which each individual's writing is richer because of the support of others.

The third assumption is that everyone can write poetry if only he or she is encouraged to do what effective writers do as they create poems. Obviously we can't teach talent, but if we assume that our students all possess creativity--identified as the ability to produce something unique and novel from one's own person--and that the creativity will appear in writing, especially in the writing of poetry, if the environment for originality is fostered, then they will in a mysterious and marvelous way write poems. Acting upon this assumption, we give the kids opportunities to explore their creative capacities in activities which are simple and familiar but with which they have every chance to be successful. Furthermore, and this is an obligatory foundation for a climate of creative growth, we encourage our beginning poets at every stage of the composing process, knowing full well that creativity needs to be urged on by kind words and support, not by criticizing or browbeating.

Here, in its entirety, then, is the complete script of the poetic writing unit based upon these assumptions.

A Unit on Writing Poetry for Secondary School Students

POETIC WRITING: WRITING A POEM ABOUT A PERSON

Class 1

We can write poems about all sorts of things--toasters, ghosts, overshoes, bats, garbage pails, daffodils, or cats. But writing poems about people can be wondrously exciting. We like to compare people to other things, to reveal them in new and striking ways, and to put into words what they seem to be essentially.

You will be asked to analyze and respond to several poems and write one or more poems of your own about a person or persons you know well. But first you will need to spend time in gathering details and fresh observations about the person of your choice. You need to spend time with the prewriting stage of the composing process.

Choose a classmate of yours, girl or boy, a person whom you know well, someone with whom you come in contact almost every day. It should be someone you can observe closely several times in the near future.

Guided Recollection

1. Describing Your Person: Outer Person

Write this heading in your journal.

"What [name of your person] Looks Like"

Under the heading, jot down sentences, phrases, or even just words which come to mind as you listen to these questions read out loud by your teacher.

Dominant Impression

a. Make believe you are looking at your person. What first comes to mind when you see him or her? What about him or her stands out in your mind?

Analogy Making

b. You may want to express your impression of the person by comparing him or her to something else. You might think of something like this:

Mary Anne is as lean and as graceful as a young colt.

Joey is as suspicious as an alley cat.

Put into words your idea of your person by filling in the blanks of this statement.

[name of person] is as _____ as _____.

Changing Focus

c. Now pretend you are the cameraman in a movie or TV production and move in close to one part of your person. If you zoom

Physical Details: Head

into the face, what do you see? What shape is your person's head? What is distinctive about his or her face? What color hair and eyes does your person have? What happens when your person smiles? How would you describe his or her lips, teeth? What happens to your person's face when he or she frowns? How do these details about your person's face fit in with your general impression of him or her?

Physical Details: Full Figure

d. Now think about how your person moves. How does he or she walk down the school corridor? If you have seen your person play a sport--tennis, soccer, basketball, or softball, for instance--can you pick him or her out of a group immediately? What distinctive moves does he or she make?

Physical Details: Dress

e. Finally, what aspects of your person's dress make him or her stand out as an unique person? Usually people dress differently for different situations--one way for school, another for a sports event, and still another for church. But is there some particular way your person dresses that would make him or her recognizable in any situation?

Guided Recollection

2. Describing a Person: Inner Person

Write this heading in your journal.

"What [name of your person] is Like Inside"

Now under this heading, write out words or phrases which describe what your person is like "inside" as your teacher reads these questions out loud.

Identifying Values

a. If your person has a day off from school, what does he or she like to do? Does he or she like to be with other people--like go to a game or sit around and just goof off with his or her friends? Or does your person prefer being by himself or herself? What does your person like to do when he or she is alone?

b. From your knowledge of your person, what gets him or her angry? What will your person fight for? Stick up for when he or she is figuratively pushed against the wall?

c. And of what accomplishments is your person proudest? If asked about what he or she does best, would your person say something like this? "That's what I do--I run the fifty yard dash. That's me." or "I repair cars and make them run like new. That's what I'm all about." What do you suppose your person would answer if you asked him or her what he or she was all about?

Observation

3. Observing Your Person

You now have jotted down extensive notes in your journal about what your person is like physically--on the outside--and what he or she is like psychologically--on the "inside." To do so, you have relied almost solely on your memory.

Effective writers use their memories as the basis for their writing, but they also observe continually in preparation for first draft composing.

Write down this heading in your journal.

"What I Saw about [name of your person]"

For the next two or three days watch your person in several different situations and jot down raw material to give you added information from which to draw when you come to write the first draft of your person.

After you have observed your person and written notes about your observations, check what you have written against your original memories of the person.

Were your memories essentially correct? Did you have to revise what you originally wrote down? Did you find whole new areas of information about your person?

Class 2

Workshopping 4. Sharing Your Descriptions of the Outer and Inner Aspects of Your Person and the Notes of Your Observations

You should now look over the notes you made from your memories of your person's outer and inner character and the notes you made after watching him or her several times. You may want to add more details or cross out stuff which now seems unnecessary or unimportant.

Aren't you surprised by how much you now know about your person which you didn't realize you knew? If you believe this is a lot of work, though, remember, all effective writers go through the same sort of process to gather background material for their writing.

After accomplished writers have written much preliminary material, they frequently ask relatives and good friends to read or listen to what they have written. They do this because they have learned how important it is to find out how another person reacts to their writing. When you write, you are so close to your material, you find it hard to identify places where information is missing or places where the structure is somehow wrong. Another person who is trained to respond thoughtfully to first draft writing can be a useful friend to a writer.

Your teacher will pair you with another student. Read out loud to your partner your notes taken from memory and the observations you jotted down. After your partner has listened to your notes, he or she should be prepared to answer these two questions.

What dominant impression do I have of your person?

What in your description would I like to know more about?

Class 3

Analyzing and Responding to Poems

5. Reading and Discussing Two Poems About Persons

Now see how two writers described in verse two persons they knew well.

Read the poems to yourself while your teacher or a student reads them out loud.

GEE, YOU'RE SO BEAUTIFUL THAT IT'S STARTING TO RAIN

Oh, Marcia,
I want your long blonde beauty
to be taught in high school,
so kids will learn that God
lives like music in the skin
and sounds like a sunshine harpsicord.
I want high school report cards
to look like this:

Playing with Gentle Glass Things
A

Computer Magic
A

Writing Letters to Those You Love
A

Finding out about Fish
A

Marcia's Long Blonde Beauty
A+!

RICHARD BRAUTIGAN

THE CENTAUR

My seventeen year old daughter
Tosses her blonde mane
Before the mirror in her boudoir.
She fixes me with a wild eye, and
I look away
Startled!
In a room where once burrowed a
Pink mouse
She is too big,
Lean, exotic, and
Potent.

—Robert W. Blake

Workshopping — In your workshop group, have someone read the poems over again so you can take the time to know how the poets used words in special ways to describe their person. You may wish to read certain phrases out loud several times to get the "feel" or the "sound" of special phrases used by the poet. In this way, you will no doubt come to have a better understanding of why the poet chose the particular words he did.

Focusing Discussion — To give focus to your discussion, choose someone in your group to write down the main ideas you come up with as you respond to these questions and directions. We shall call this person the scribe.

Personal Response — a. First of all, how do you feel about the poems? Do they make you feel sad, puzzled, or happy? Or what?

Dominant Impression — b. What dominant impressions of Marcia and of the girl in her boudoir do you get? What specific words and phrases help to build up impressions?

Physical Appearance — c. From the lines in the poems, can you tell what the two girls look like physically? Neither writer tells you this, but can you guess how the two girls might move?

Persons' Values — d. From what the poets reveal about the girls, what are they like "inside"? Again, the poets don't come right out and tell us what they don't like, but can you infer some of the things in life they are turned off by? What do you think they would stand up to if they had to make decisions about what was right or wrong?

Persons' Values — e. What do you believe the two girls would like to be praised most for? If they had to sum up what they were all about, how do you suppose they would answer?

Figurative Language

f. Find examples of unusual ways the poets have used language to reveal their persons. For instance, in the first poem, the writer tells us "that God/ lives like music in the skin/ and sounds like a sunshine harpsicord." And in the second poem, the writer tells us that his daughter "tosses her blonde mane." What do these phrases mean to you? Find other examples of how the poets used words in unusual ways.

Evaluating Discussion Summaries

Your scribe should now read out loud his or her notes on your discussion. You can all help your scribe and become better yourselves at summarizing the main ideas from a discussion by taking a few minutes now to answer this one question.

How well did the scribe pick out the main points of our discussion?

Figurative Language

6. Using Figurative Language to Reveal Your Person

People despair of ever describing the differences between prose and poetry. So we won't even try! But most of us can tell a good poem when we meet one, and a good poem almost always reveals through the use of words in surprising ways something new about us and our world.

Playing with Words and Structures

To get some practice at revealing what your person is like by just fooling around with words in different combinations, fill in the blanks to these sentences in your journal. Write down the first words that come to your mind as you read these phrases. Trust the feelings and ideas you have buried away in the unconscious part of your mind. The point here is not to describe completely your person but to arrive at your own original thoughts which suggest the person.

And don't be afraid to use crazy words in the blanks. You may come up with some completely original ideas.

[name of your person] loves _____ but hates _____.

[name of your person] is like a (name of color) (name of plant, tree, or bird).

[name of your person] is a (name of song).

[name of your person] was at one time _____ but now he or she is _____.

[name of your person] ! You're a (n) (name of a creature).

Look over what you have written. Change words. Cross out those you don't like. Start over if you feel like it. Create new sentences for your person if you like.

Class 4

Writing a First Draft

7. Writing a Poem about a Person

At this point, you may be wondering why you have been asked to perform these particular writing activities. Well, you have been doing what experienced writers do before they start in the first draft of piece. You have been working in the prewriting stage of the composing process

Reviewing Notes

To refresh your memory, look over the materials about your person you have collected in your journal.

Directions for Writing

You should by this time be more than ready to write a first draft of a poem about your person. These are your directions.

Writing a Poem about a Person

The school literary magazine will publish poems this year. A board of students and teachers will choose the best poems to be included in the magazine. You are to write a poem about a person you know well to be submitted to the journal.

Your PURPOSE is to write a poem to reveal the outer and inner characteristics of a person you know well.

Your READERS will be the students and teachers in your school.

Your WRITER'S ROLE is to delight your readers by your surprising use of language. Since you are writing a poem, and not a description for a short story, you will not want to try to describe every aspect of your person but will meticulously choose words which suggest and reveal the essence of your person.

These two poems on "Dan" and "Barb," as well as the one about "Diane," are representative of what the students produced as first drafts.

Gee, you're so good natured
That it's sunshiny outside.

Oh, Dan
I want your good naturedness
to be taught in school,
so kids will learn that
animals should be treated with kindness,
and fish are dumb.
I want high school report cards
to look like this:

Learning to smile:
A
Showing a kindness to animals
A
Studying fish
B+
Personality buildup
A+

Steve Watkins

Gee, you're so happy
that the sun is shining.

Oh, Barb
I want your happiness
to be taught in high school,
so kids will learn that God
lives like yellow balloons
rising high in the sky.
I want high school report
cards to look like this:

Talking with friends
A
Being yourself
A
Smiling
A
Walking in the cold
A
Being happy
A+

Anne Pawlaczyk

Assessment of the Unit by their Teacher

Their teacher, Laurie Taillie, made these observations about the success of the unit.

Day 1: What _____ looks like

What _____ is like inside

These headings seem a bit elementary for this grade level. The seniors want a more sophisticated title or perhaps no title at all.

Student comments: "This is like kindergarten." or "This is silly." Lots of giggling occurred as I asked the questions. They are afraid to expose how they feel about another person--so different from their attitudes toward describing objects and places.

They are new to this step-by-step process; however they are willing to do whatever I ask. They are very cooperative.

Day 2: They were given three days for observations. A few people didn't write anything down which made it difficult to proceed to the next step. Some felt that they hadn't observed anything new or different from what they had written on day one. Absence is a problem, that is, getting absentees caught up with the rest of the class.

I found it's a good idea to assign them partners for workshopping. They're more serious about the assignment and less apt to fool around than if they worked with friends. They read each others' notes silently--to cut down on noise (The class has thirty-four students). They were very good about responding to each other, and at the end of class, the students said they felt they had learned something from this activity of workshopping.

Day 3: Students were given poems by Brautigan and Blake and worked in groups of five or six on questions written on the board. Some groups lag behind in answering. Either they aren't working or they are trying to answer very carefully.

It's a good idea to call on every group for each question, otherwise everyone's ideas might not be heard.

Day 4: Students have become confused by the Brautigan and Blake poems, and their responses to the questions show their lack of insight and good thought. They need a lot of direction in interpretation. Their thoughts are immature, and peer pressure makes it difficult for them to say what they think. Some thought they knew what the poems were saying but couldn't respond until they were sure they were right.

Day 5: Students were given forms following the two poems and were asked to put their observations into one or both structures. They were asked, at the end of the period, to read what they had written. There were many volunteers, and the poems they wrote were very heartwarming, almost all expressing some excellent imagery.

I was amazed at their willingness to read and share, especially since many wrote about other people in class!

Conclusions: I think this activity was excellent and one they really needed. I felt a satisfaction at the outcome, and I think they did, too. The feedback they got from their classmates was worth much more than what I said although I do think they appreciate reinforcement from me.

I believe this activity helped them to really observe and see another person in ways they hadn't thought of. I may try the same kind of approach when I have them write their poems about themselves.

The activities were originally aimed at middle school or at the lower grades in high school, so I wasn't surprised when the students found the opening structures "elementary" and "silly." It was good they were "cooperative," for, as was reported, the "step-by-step process" was something new to them. Evidently the observation period was unnecessary; most students failed to note anything about their person or found nothing different to report from their original remembered impressions. Notice how Laurie handled the problem of workshopping with a large class of thirty-four: she paired up students and had them read each other's notes silently. I was pleased to hear the students found workshopping--what I believe is an essential activity--to be valuable.

Nothing surprised me more than the students' confusion--or was it lack of experience--with dealing with what I believed were two simple and straightforward poems. I thought they would like Brautigan's "report card" for Marcia and would understand the father's amazement at his daughter's metamorphosis in "The Centaur." It is apparent they needed further experience in reading figurative language and in discussing how it works before they could interpret new poems confidently and with pleasure.

I was not as surprised as Laurie was by the relish with which the students read out loud their poems and talked about them. It's always been my experience that almost everyone, with very little prodding, comes to relish reading out loud and talking about writing which springs from personal experiences and individual feelings honestly arrived at.

Guidelines for Writing Poetry and Teaching Poetic Writing

As I have worked with school students, from the elementary grades through high school, and with college students, both undergraduate and graduate, with writing poetry, I have asked them to describe "what happened" as they wrote a poem. This is my summary of what amateur poets--like most of the ones you and I work with--had to say about how they created poems.

The Process of Writing Poetry

In drafting, the writer creates a poem by

--using formulas and patterns like those first used by other poets, e.g. the poet speaking directly to a creature such as Blake's "The Tyger" or Issa's haiku to a snail.

--starting with a feeling ("Something moves me.") and by letting an image or images come from the feeling. The images may be linked together by a common motif, e.g. "water" or "music" images.

--starting with an image and by letting the images evoke feelings.

--starting with an idea or theme and by letting the associated words flow.

In revising, the writer creates a poem by

--condensing, eliminating unnecessary words, using one word for many, continually moving toward the essence.

--finding patterns in first drafts and then by concentrating on a single pattern and refining it.

--tinkering with words through adding, deleting, substituting, and moving them around.

--using a word standing for a part to represent the whole (synecdoche: using the part for the whole).

--using one word to stand for another (metonymy: speaking of one thing in terms of another); making subconscious "leaps" from one image or feeling to another.

The methods for teaching the writing of poetry follow from an analysis of the process of producing poetry. When asked what techniques seemed to produce the best results with their students, experienced teachers arrived at these guidelines.

Teaching the Writing of Poetry

The teacher teaches students to write poetry by

--inundating them with poetry of all kinds, from all ages, through professsional and student models.

--encouraging them to give responses freely (both intellectual and emotional) to poems; maintaining a "free" classroom atmosphere in which students are not inhibited from responding.

--letting students take risks in writing poems; allowing them to learn by their failures; giving them opportunities to try many kinds of poems.

--supporting the students in their writing voices so they'll create poems about matters which affect them deeply, using words which are naturally theirs.

--encouraging students to write poems about what they honestly see, feel, and think, realizing that this process can be unnerving for teacher and student alike but at the same time knowing that the only important writing is truthful writing.

--helping students to be open to experience, to interact with other creatures as well as with humans, to observe, to savor, to feel, to think, to evaluate experiences, and to put what they have perceived into words.

--persuading students he or she is not going to "evaluate" their efforts (by marking in red errors in spelling and punctuation, trite expressions, or matters of "proper form") but will describe what they do (can teach them and other students to describe as well) with the aim of improving their work.

--helping the students to set goals in writing as the basis for future assessments, e.g. teacher and students cooperatively decide on what aspect of writing they wish to concentrate on as a basis for evaluation, for instance, fresh images referring to specific items.

But Why Bother with Teaching Kids to Write Poetry?

And a good question too.

Most of the teachers and students have been unabashed in their love of reading, talking about, and writing poetry. But at the same time, the teachers were generally at a loss to put into words why they should take their students' time in the English classroom with matters of synecdoche, metonymy, rhythm, figures, images, and with just fooling around with words and language structures.

After some pushing and prodding and begrudged acknowledgement that an intimate and intuitive relationship with figurative language couldn't be all bad, we arrived--as all good pedagogues feel guilty if they don't--at a summary of some reasons why we should bother to teach kids to write poetry.

Reasons for Writing Poetry

Writing Poetry

--gives us pleasure, the enjoyment which is an indispensable part of our lives. If we deny song, rhythm, and figurative language, we do so at a high psychological price. An unwritten poem may, in fact, give us fits of depression or send us to the looney bin.

--provides us with a special kind of knowledge. It is an amazing paradox, but poems tell us in words what essentially can't be explained. Poems reveal the strange bonds between creatures and human beings, make us aware of our dreams, our feelings, of what it means to be human, to be born, to grow up, to love, and to die. No other writing can do this so well: not dictionaries, telephone directories, encyclopedias, history books, nor biographies. Stories, novels, and plays come close, but they just can't do the job poems do.

--teaches us to see life fully, with all of our senses. Writing poetry lets us see life, as a student once remarked, "in technicolor."

--trains us to use words precisely. When we write poetry, we are forced to savor the words we use, to test their meanings and sound, and to search in an unending quest for the exact word for the precise place.

--compels us to think creatively, to couple dissimilar things in novel ways. When we see and feel like poets and learn to put into words our sights and emotions, we are being creative in a natural but basic way.

--teaches us to create complete pieces of discourse in compact, manageable forms. Poetry is writing in a microcosm. A good poem, with a beginning, middle, and end is a satisfyingly finished whole.

--helps us, through the practice of using words precisely in original ways and of condensing language, to write more effectively in other forms of discourse. All effective writers use the tools of the poet to assist readers in seeing clearly what they are trying to convey: simile, metaphor, surprise, word sounds, and controlled rhythms.

--assists us in learning about ourselves. Poetry is created from the unknown part of the human spirit. When we read and write poetry, we work with the subconscious, irrational, and mysterious part of ourselves. Everyone is a completely unique individual, but we all share common feelings, fears, and hopes. Poetry helps us to understand how we experience together these feelings. As we read and write figurative language, we bring to the surface our unconscious longings and desires, learn what they are, and call them by name.

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